Chapter 16

Lessons from Cypris Chat:
Revisiting Virtual Communities as Communities

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ABSTRACT

What makes a successful online community? This is a question that would probably not have much meaning to someone in the early 1990. At the time, use of the World Wide Web had just begun to spread, first across college campuses and then among the general public in North America and Western Europe. A more common question, and one that Wellman and Gulia (1999) asked, was do online groups even call themselves communities at all? This chapter examines how much has changed about how we perceive online community since 1995: the people we converse with, the reasons for communicating online and the pitfalls encountered. It also introduces Cypris Chat, a virtual world community within Second Life that stubbornly clings to Internet first adopter values and goals, a group that reminds us that an online existence dominated by social networking sites has its alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews Wellman and Gulia’s “Virtual Communities as Communities” in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock’s Communities in Cyberspace (1999). Through asking seven questions related to online communities (as the authors then understood them), this chapter lists the ways in which their analyses and predictions regarding online communities were sometimes prescient but often did not take into account the ways online interactions would be shaped by social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. The author then looks at just the kind of community that Wellman and Gulia optimistically predicted, a learning group within Linden Lab’s virtual world platform, Second Life. By providing examples from this group, Cypris Chat, related to the same seven questions that Wellman and Gulia asked, the author proposes that the Cypris model provides a way forward for the optimistic, adventurous conception of virtual communities that the Internet’s early adopters still hold, one that fosters robust communities of

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Lessons from Cypris Chat

practice (Wenger, 1998), and allows participants to leverage anonymity to learn while expanding their social circle beyond their offline existence.

Background

As of this writing, it is 2017, and for some reason Issac Asimov’s 1964 predictions about life 50 years in the future (i.e. 2014) are making the rounds on the Internet again. Asimov, a writer perhaps now best known for *I, Robot* (1950) and other explorations of the moral implications of artificial intelligence, has been in retrospect considered prophetic. Many of his predictions regarding communications were prescient:

*Communications will become sight-sound and you will see as well as hear the person you telephone. The screen can be used not only to see the people you call but also for studying documents and photographs and reading passages from books. Synchronous satellites, hovering in space will make it possible for you to direct-dial any spot on earth.*

And others...not so much:

*For that matter, you will be able to reach someone at the moon colonies, concerning which General Motors puts on a display of impressive vehicles (in model form) with large soft tires intended to negotiate the uneven terrain that may exist on our natural satellite.* (Asimov, 1964)

The lesson, of course, is twofold. First, extrapolating from current trends is possible, but not always fruitful. In this case the space race between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. would eventually wind down, making trips to the moon politically unnecessary. Other popular predictions about life in the near future (flying automobiles, personal jetpacks, etc.) did not come to pass either, and it was to be the relatively rapid improvements made in integrated circuits and communications technology that would take center stage in the last of years of the 20th Century. Secondly, such predictions occasionally demonstrate how sidetracked or distracted societies can become by technological development in unexpected ways. Still utilizing Asimov’s example of the moon colonies that have yet to materialize, perhaps visionaries in the 1960s had a clearer focus on where we needed to go than we do now 50 years later. After all, with modern day luminaries like Stephen Hawking again reminding us how imperative space colonization will be in the long run (Hui, 2006), it has become apparent that we ignore the values and clarity of purpose of the visionaries of the past at our own peril.

Which brings us to this brief meditation on expectations regarding online communities. In the author’s own research on Cypris Chat, a language learning community on the Second Life (SL) platform, he primarily utilized Wenger, White and Smith’s (2009) conception of “digital habitats“ to determine whether or not it could be considered a successful online community of practice (spoiler: it was). However, research in this vein led to a rather intriguing – and lesser known – think piece on what virtual communities might be capable of. Looking at what it got right – and wrong – about how we would interact online not only clarifies the digital divide that separates older users from SNS (social networking service) savvy milleniels, but also helps explain the lasting popularity of virtual worlds like Second Life among Internet “early adopters“.